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BALLADS AND SONGS OF WESTERN NORTH
CAROLINA

BY LOUISE RAND BASCOM

THE process of collecting the songs common to the mountain section of western North Carolina is a difficult one, for the mountaineers suspiciously evade direct questions, and vanish entirely if too closely pressed. Hence the collector must necessarily be content with the scraps which he overhears in passing a cabin, unless he is so fortunate as to be acquainted with the different clans, or so lucky as to be able to attend one of those interesting celebrations known as Fiddlers' Conventions.

The convention is essentially an affair of the people, and is usually held in a stuffy little schoolhouse, lighted by one or two evil-smelling lamps, and provided with a rude, temporary stage. On this the fifteen fiddlers and "follerers of banjo pickin'" sit, their coats and hats hung conveniently on pegs above their heads, their faces inscrutable. To all appearances they do not care to whom the prize is awarded, for the winner will undoubtedly treat. Also, they are not bothered by the note-taking of zealous judges, as these gentlemen are not appointed until after each contestant has finished his allotted "three pieces."

To one unused to the mountain tunes, the business of selecting the best player would be not unlike telling which snail had eaten the rhododendron leaf, for execution and technique differ little with the individual performers, and the tune, no matter what it may be called, always sounds the same. It is composed of practically two bars which are repeated over and over and over again until the fiddler or banjo picker, as the case may be, stops abruptly from sheer fatigue. The first effect is like one of the strange tom-tidi-tom noises heard on a midway, but after a few unprejudiced moments of attention, melody, stirring, full of pathos, rich with suggestion, emerges from the monotonous din. Strangely enough, no matter how sad the words and music may be, they are always rendered as rapidly as is compatible with the skill of the musician, and without inflection. The tunes are played at all of the dances, whistled and sung by the men and boys everywhere. The mountaineer who cannot draw music from the violin, the banjo, or the "French harp," is probably non-existent, and not infrequently one may see a gaunt idler squatting by the roadside, picking the banjo, and at the same time working the "French harp," held in place by a wire around the player's neck. The fiddle is always a battered heirloom; the banjo is home-made, and very cleverly fashioned, too, with its drum-head of cat's hide, its wooden parts of hickory (there are no frets). The "French harp" is such

as can be purchased at the nearest general merchandise store for five, ten, fifteen, or twenty-five cents, according to the affluence of the buyer. Mention must also be made of "the fellers that han'l the bones." These instruments are long, slightly curved sticks of locust-wood, and they excel any castanets which can be bought. The ability to manipulate them is undoubtedly an art practised only by a few, who are looked upon as rarely accomplished. The women are also endowed with musical talent; but they regard it as the men's prerogative, and rarely touch an instrument when their husbands or sons are present. The author has known a certain woman for a dozen years or more, and never dreamed that she could handle a bow till, upon one occasion, when much was said in admiration of her son's skill, she mentioned casually that she had n't "knowed the time" when she could n't fiddle.

The tunes are very old. One fiddler, aged ninety-four, states that he is playing his great-grandfather's "pieces." They undoubtedly originated in the mountains, but it is difficult to come to any decision in regard to the words, though it is probable that they also have their origin there. Certainly "On the Banks of the Wabash," "Just One Girl," and other so-called popular airs, never reach the mountains, though upon occasion the old tunes will reappear embellished with some ornate title bequeathed by a passing stranger. As few members of even the new generation can read, it is obvious that the memory is made to retain the sound of the spoken words. Thus, in true ballad style, each man renders the same song somewhat differently, and often the same man cannot repeat the same song twice in the same way. The mountaineers object to having it thought that the songs are in any way connected with oral tradition. One woman, for example, made this remark: "You kin git 'em all in a book we've got that's got 'Nellie Grey,' 'Mollie Darling,' an' all them old songs in hit;" but the book was not forthcoming upon request, and as the woman who ventured this remark belongs to the lowest class of mountaineers and cannot read, it is probable that she has never possessed such a book. Other illiterate mountaineers delight in talking of the "ref'rence books in their trunks." They certainly own no trunks, and probably the daily papers pasted on the walls to keep out the cold are the nearest things they own to "ref'rence books," and these, of course, have been given them. Still, an allusion to "Mollie Darling" and "Nellie Grey," known quantities, as it were, is not to be despised. However, the tunes bearing these names have no resemblance to the original ones; and it is not likely that the words correspond either, though the author has never been so fortunate as to have heard them, if, indeed, they are sung. Very few mountaineers, familiar with many tunes, know the words to more than one ballad, and then they always state that they do not know it all. This further complicates the work of collecting, for a score of those persons who happen to be approached may not know the

words of the song desired. It seems difficult for them to remember the words, although they hear them sung repeatedly. When the ballads are sung, they are rendered in an indescribably high, piercing, nasal head tone, which carries remarkably well, and which gathers unto itself a weirdness that compels the blood to jump in the veins.

Some of the songs are coarse, considered entertaining, no doubt; but they are chiefly romantic or heroic in character, and, like the lovers' laments, here quoted in the vernacular, have as many versions as there are singers.

KITTY KLINE

A

1. Take me home, take me home, take me home,
Take me home, take me home, take me home,
When the moon shines bright, and the stars give light,
Take me home, take me home, take me home.
2. "Oh, who will shoe your little feet,
Oh, who will glove your little hand,
Oh, who will kiss your sweet rosy cheek,
When I'm gone to that far-distant land?"
3. "Oh, Popper'll shoe my little feet,
And Mommer'll glove my little hand,
And you shall kiss my sweet, rosy cheek,
When you come from that far-distant land.¹
4. "Oh, I can't stay hyar by myself,
Oh, I can't stay hyar by myself,
I'll weep like a willer, an' I'll mourn like a dove,
Oh, I can't stay hyar by myself.
5. "If I was a little fish
I would swim to the bottom of the sea,
And thar I'd sing my sad little song,
Oh, I can't stay hyar by myself.
- "Oh, I can't stay hyar by myself, etc.
6. "If I was a sparrer bird,
I would fly to the top of a tree,
And thar I'd sing my sad little song,
Oh, I can't stay hyar by myself.
- "Oh, I can't stay hyar by myself, etc.

¹ This stanza and the preceding will be recognized as belonging to "The Lass of Roch Royal" (Child, No. 76).

7. "Yonder sets a turtle-dove,
A-hoppin' from vine to vine,
He's a mournin' fur his own true love,
An' why not me fur mine?"
8. "I'm a goin' ter the top of that nigh pine,
I'm a goin' ter the top of that nigh pine,
An' ef I fall 'thout breakin' my neck,
You'll know who I love the best."

KITTY KLINE

B

1. Take me home to my Mommer, Kitty Kline,
Take me home to my Mommer, Kitty Kline,
When the stars shine bright, and the moon gives light,
Take me home to my Mommer, Kitty Kline.
2. Take me home to my Mommer, Kitty Kline,
Take me home to my Mommer, Kitty Kline,
With my head upon your breast like a birdie in its nest,
Take me home to my Mommer, Kitty Kline.
3. I'm as free a little bird as I can be,
I'm as free a little bird as I can be,
I'll build my nest on sweet Kitty's breast,
Whar the bad boys can't tear it down.

Take me home to my Mommer, etc.

The ballad then proceeds as Version A until after the stanza about the "sparrer" bird, when these stanzas are added: —

If I was a honey-bee,
I'd dip the honey from the flowers,
An' I'd fly an' sing my sad little song,
I can't stay hyar by myself.

So fare ye well, Kitty Kline,
So fare ye well, Kitty Kline,
You shall wear my gold-diamont ring,
When I'm in a far-distant land.

This fascinating ballad is at least fifty years old, and how much farther it dates back is not easy to conjecture, unless some one is able to find it in an old song-book, as the mountain woman suggested. It contains the regular ballad refrain, the question and answer stanzas typical of ballads of this kind, and at the same time employs such objects of every-day life as sparrer-birds, turtle-doves, honey-bees, shoes, trees,

and fish. This is the ballad which is most universally known. It might be called the national song of the highlanders.

One of the most plaintive of mountain songs is a ballad which is said to have been written July 5, 1907, but which, upon inquiry in other neighborhoods, is found to be ten years old at least. It is called "Bonnie Blue Eyes," and it illustrates the use of an object only recently made known to the common intelligence. In the old ballads we find stanza after stanza introducing the pen-knife or pin or other implements sufficiently new to the ballad-maker to be interesting. In this ballad the novelty is a train, something which few of the mountaineers to the present day have seen. Also, the ballad-maker, who seems to have been an adventurous soul, threatens to journey to the West, a land in the eyes of the mountaineers similar to what America must have been in the eyes of the Spaniards. Curiously enough, the men who leave home at all do go to the very far West; but they always come back again, when they've seen the world, and resume their former method of living. "Bonnie Blue Eyes" is an admirable ballad for illustrating the inability of the musician to render the same "piece" twice in the same way. It is first given as it was sung for the author, then as it was "drawed off" for the author by the musician, a mountain girl of "considerable schoolin'."

BONNIE BLUE EYES

A

1. Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry,
Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry,
Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry,
Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry.
2. I hyar the train comin', I do,
I hyar the train comin', I do,
I hyar the train comin' to carry me through,
I hyar the train comin', I do-o-o.
3. Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry,
Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry,
Ef ye cry, little Bonnie, you'll spile your eye,
Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry-i-i.
4. I asked your Popper for you,
I asked your Mommer for you,
I asked your Popper an' Mommer for you,
They both said "No-o-o."
5. She tole me she loved me, she did,
She tole me she loved me, she did,
She tole me she loved me, she never did lie,
Good-by, little Bonnie, good-by-i-i.

6. I'm forty-one miles from home,
 I'm forty-one miles from home,
 I'm forty-one miles from home,
 Good-by, little Bonnie Blue Eyes.

7. And now she's married an' gone,
 An' now she's married an' gone.
 I've waited around fur her too long,
 An' now she's married an' gone.

BONNIE BLUE EYES

B

1. I'm goin' out West next fall,
 I'm goin' out West next fall,
 I'm going out West, whar times is the best,
 I'm goin' out West next fall.
2. Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry,
 Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry,
 For if you cry, you'll spile your eye,
 Don't cry, little Bonnie, don't cry.
3. When you tole me you loved me, you lied,
 When you tole me you loved me, you lied,
 When you tole me you loved me, you lied, my dear,
 When you tole me you loved me, you lied.
4. I asked your Mommer fur you,
 I asked your Popper fur you,
 I asked your Popper an' Mommer both fur you,
 They both said "No-oh-no."
5. I'm forty-one miles from home,
 I'm forty-one miles from home,
 I'm forty-one miles from home, Bonnie Blue Eyes,
 I'm forty-one miles from home.
6. I hyar the train comin', I do,
 I hyar the train comin', I do,
 I hyar the train comin' to carry me through,
 To see my little Bonnie Blue Eyes.
7. I'm goin' to see Bonnie Blue Eyes,
 I'm goin to see Bonnie Blue Eyes,
 The only little girl I ever loved
 Was my little Bonnie Blue Eyes.
8. But now she's married an' gone,
 But now she's married an' gone.

But now she's married.

I've waited too long to get my little Bonnie Blue Eyes.

The train also finds a place in the pathetic ballad called "The Midnight Dew" or "The Devil's Dream," though one cannot see how the latter title applies.

MIDNIGHT DEW

1. In the midnight dew, love,
I often think of you,
When I'm rambling in the midnight dew, love,
I often think of you.
2. You can hyar the whistle blow,
You can tell the train I'm on,
You can hyar the whistle blow,
A hundred miles from home.
3. I'm a fool about you,
An' you're the only darlin', too,
Lord, but I'm a fool
About you, hoo-hoo.
4. If the train runs right,
I'll go home tomorrer night,
You can hyar the whistle blow,
A hundred miles from home.
5. If the train runs a wreck,
I'm sure to break my neck,
I'll never see my honey
Any more, hoo-hoo.
6. My ole shoes is worn,
An' my ole close is torn,
An' I can't go to meetin'
This way, hoo-hoo.
7. Oh, lordy me,
For thar's trouble I do see,
Fur nobody cyars
Fur me, hoo-hoo.
8. Oh, it's oh lordy me,
An' it's oh lordy my,
An' I want to go to Heaven
When I die, hoo-hoo.
9. I'll pawn you my watch
An' my wagon an' my team,

An' if that don't pay my darlin's bill,
I'll pawn my gold-diamond ring, hoo-hoo.

10. You've caused me to weep
An' you've caused me to mourn,
An' you've caused me to leave
My home, hoo-hoo.

11. You've caused me to walk
That long lonesome road
Which has never been
Travelled afore, hoo-hoo.

Aside from all else, two points are of especial interest in "Midnight Dew." One is that considerable power of observation is shown in the lines, "You can hyar the whistle blow a hundred miles from home." Owing to the rarity of the air, those living in this part of the country, thirty, forty, fifty miles from a railroad, could set their watches by the engine's whistle, though they don't, because a Southern train is proverbially never on time. The use of the word "pawn" is also worthy of note. One would naturally say that such a word would stamp the ballad as foreign to the mountains; but this is not necessarily so, for the mountaineers are notoriously fond of new words, and make use of them on every occasion, which often is not the right one.

Frequently one finds two ballads which are very similar, though they are by no means different versions of the same ballad. This is exemplified in the two somewhat fragmentary ballads, "My Own True Love" and "Sweet Betsy" or "Charming Betsy."

MY OWN TRUE LOVE

1. My home's in the State of North Carolina,
My home's in the State of North Carolina,
My home's in the State of North Carolina, my true love,
An' I never expect to see you any more.
2. I'm goin' off to the State of North Carolina,
I'm goin' off to the State of North Carolina,
I'm goin' off to the State of North Carolina, my true love,
An' I never expect to see you any more.
3. Oh, whar's that finger ring I gave you,
Oh, whar's that finger ring I gave you,
Oh, whar's that finger ring I gave you, my true love,
For I never expect to see you any more.
4. Now wear it on your right hand, my true love,
Now wear it on your right hand my true love,
Now wear it on your right hand, my true love,
For I never expect to see you any more.

CHARMING BETSY

1. I'm comin' round the mountain, charmin' Betsy,
I'm comin' round the mountain, 'fore I leave,
An' if I never more see you,
Take this ring, an' think of me.
2. An' wear this ring I give to you,
An' wear it on your right han',
An' when I'm dead an' forgotten,
Don't give it to no other man.

The ring plays a prominent part in the two ballads just quoted, and is also mentioned in "Kitty Kline." Why the maiden is admonished to wear the love token on her right hand is a matter for conjecture, unless the fond lover is willing to leave her for another. As a matter of fact, the mountain women practically never wear rings.

The heroic ballads cluster for the most part around Jesse James, who seems to have been the Robin Hood of the section. Just how his exploits reached this locality is puzzling; but it is not improbable that some Missouri mountaineer, moving back to North Carolina, has brought the songs with him. The words are by no means beautiful, but they are always shouted with great gusto. One of the songs goes thus: —

JESSE JAMES

1. Yes, I went down to the depot
Not many days ago: they followed on behind,
And I fell upon my knees, and I offered up the keys
To Frank and his brother, Jesse James.
2. Poor Jesse James, poor Jesse James,
He robbed that Danville train;
Yes, the dirty little coward, he shot Mr. Howard,
An' they laid poor Jesse in his grave.
3. Frank says to Jesse, not many days ago,
"Let's rob that Danville train."
An' Jesse says to Frank, "We'll take it as we go,
For we may not be hyar any more."

Poor Jesse James, etc.

4. Jesse was a man, an' he travelled over the land,
With his sword an' his pistol to his side.
Robert Ford watched his eye an' shot him on the sly,
An' they laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Poor Jesse James, etc.

5. Yes, Jesse had a wife, the darlin' of his life,
An' the children all was brave.
Robert Ford watched his eye an' shot him on the sly,
An' they laid poor Jesse in his grave.
6. It was on Friday night, the moon was shinin' bright,
An' Jesse was standin' 'fore his glass,
Robert Ford's pistol ball brought him tremblin' from the wall,
An' they laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Poor Jesse James, etc.
7. Well, the people of the West, when they heard of Jesse's death,
They wondered how he come to die.
Robert Ford watched his eye an' shot him on the sly,
An' they laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Having no records, the author is unable to give the day of Jesse's death, but in all probability Friday was selected by the ballad-maker because of the popular superstition that it is a day of ill-luck.

"John Hardy" is another personage who seems to have left his name to posterity. This ballad is more similar to the old English and Scottish Ballads than any which have been quoted. Here, too, the questions and answers hold a prominent place. The "disperated" in the first line is probably as near as the singer could get to "dissipated," though "desperate" may be the word intended.

JOHN HARDY

1. John Hardy was a mean an' disperated man,
He carried two guns ever' day,
He shot a man in New Orlean Town,
John Hardy never lied to his gun, poor boy.
2. He's been to the east and he's been to the west,
An' he's been this wide world round,
He's been to the river an' been baptized,
An' he's been on his hangin' grounds, poor boy.
3. John Hardy's father was standin' by,
Sayin', "Johnie, what have you done?"
He murdered a man in the same ole town,
You ought to see John Hardy gittin' away, poor boy.
4. John Hardy's mother come weepin' around
Cryin', "Johnie, what have you done?"
"It's all for the sake of her I love?"
An' they run John Hardy back in jail, poor boy.

Of the ruder ballads, "Lulu" is an example, though it is obviously not of mountain origin, from the very fact of the allusion to "ole missus." Still it is probable that many of the stanzas have been invented in the highlands.

LULU.

1. I went afishin' an' fished fur shad,
First I caught was my old ad.
Jerked him up an' he fell back,
The next one bit was a great big cat.
2. I'll give you a nickel
An' I'll give you a dime
To see little Lulu
Cut her shine.
3. My ole missus promised me that when she died
She'd set me free,
An' now she's dead an' gone to hell,
Hope the Devil'll chunk her well.
4. Shout, little Lulu,
Shout your best,
Fur your ole grandmaw's
Gone to rest.
5. The bull frog's up
In the bottom of the well
He swore by God
He'd gone to hell.
6. He jumped in the fire
An' scorched his hand;
If he ain't in a hot place
I'll be damned.
7. Love you fur a nickel,
Love you fur a dime;
Lulu, get your hair cut
Just like mine.

The last stanza is like the popular song which used to be sung everywhere:—

Johnnie get your hair cut,
Johnnie get your hair cut,
Johnnie get your hair cut,
Just like mine.

Johnnie, get your gun,
Your sword and your pistol, etc.

"Lulu" is probably the form in which it was brought to the mountains by some negro minstrel. Another song which has probably been transplanted from the lowlands goes as follows: —

1. I'm alone, I'm alone,
 An' I feel I'm growin' old,
 Oh, how lonely, oh, how lonely,
 I'm living all alone.

2. I was taught by my mommer
 Who sleepeth in the tomb.
I was led by my father,
 An' wandered here alone.

I'm alone, etc.

3. You remember my children
 That set upon my knee
 An' how I kissed my little darlin'
 On the day that I was free.

I'm alone, etc.

Another song of the coarser type is known as "Going Down to Town." It is similar in character to the "Arkansaw Traveller," and the fourth verse is always the invention of the singer. It runs on endlessly, and begins thus: —

I'm goin' down to town,
 I'm goin' down to town,
I'm goin' down to town,
 To chaw my terbacco down.

Git along down town,
 Git along down town,
Git along down town,
 To bile that cabbage down.

The ballads quoted, if ballads they can be called, are only a very few of those sung in the mountains. There are many typical ones which have not yet come into the hands of the author. Two of the most desirable of these are "Sourwood Mountain," which begins, —

I have a love in the Sourwood Mountains,
 She's gone crippled an' blind.
She's broke the heart of many poor feller,
 But she ain't broke this'n of mine.

and "Johnie Henry," which begins, —

Johnie Henry was a hard-workin' man,
He died with his hammer in his hand.

The latter is obviously not a ballad of the mountains, for no highlander was ever sufficiently hard-working to die with anything in his hand except possibly a plug of borrowed "terbac." However, the author's informant declares that it is very sad and tearful, "very sweet," and it may appear in print "when Tobe sees Tom, an' gits him to larn him what he ain't forgot of hit from Muck's pickin'."

HIGHLANDS, N. C.